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Making a Connection between Student Achievement, Teacher Accountability, and Quality Classroom Instruction

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Abstract

The importance of standardized test results is becoming more prevalent in the structure of classroom instruction and the operation of schools throughout the nation due to pressure on educators and students from various levels of authority. This study looks at the relationship between classroom instruction and standardized test content and the effects this has on students, parents, and teachers. Seventeen fourth grade students, fourteen parents of fourth graders, and fifteen elementary teachers completed surveys. The study describes several positive and negative aspects to standardized tests, along with ideas of who is responsible for test performance. Standardized tests provide comparisons and are a tool for improvement. Too much emphasis is placed on high stakes test along with unrealistic expectations for some. The results indicate that ongoing assessment is effective for measuring student learning and teacher effectiveness.

Keywords

Standardized Testing, Accountability, and Student Achievement

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Making a Connection between Student Achievement, Teacher Accountability, and Quality Classroom Instruction

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The importance of standardized test results is becoming more prevalent in the structure of classroom instruction and the operation of schools throughout the nation due to pressure on educators and students from various levels of authority. This study looks at the relationship between classroom instruction and standardized test content and the effects this has on students, parents, and teachers. Seventeen fourth grade students, fourteen parents of fourth graders, and fifteen elementary teachers completed surveys. The study describes several positive and negative aspects to standardized tests, along with ideas of who is responsible for test performance. Standardized tests provide comparisons and are a tool for improvement. Too much emphasis is placed on high stakes test along with unrealistic expectations for some. The results indicate that ongoing assessment is effective for measuring student learning and teacher effectiveness. Key Words: Standardized Testing, Accountability, and Student Achievement

Accountability, high-stakes, and student achievement are popular terms among educators. Students' performance on standardized achievement tests is used to a high extent in reflecting the quality of instruction students receive from teachers.

According to Vandevort, Amrein-Beardsley, and Berliner (2004) the quality of a teacher in the classroom is the single most important factor in determining how well a child learns. Throughout the United States, schools are being evaluated based on their students' performance on a state mandated test given every year. Because of the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act, schools and teachers are being held accountable in more ways than ever based on students' performance.

The purpose of this study is to explore other alternatives to hold educators accountable besides a single standardized test. This exploration includes finding an alternate evaluation process for both teachers and students that reflects instruction taught in the classroom, which is based on objectives and standards. The review of literature that follows stresses the importance of connection and communication between those who provide instruction, those who create the standards, and others who decide on assessment procedures or evaluation of these assessments. In addition, the review will examine standardized testing to see if these measurements are reflective of classroom instruction and if they represent student learning.

Teacher Accountability

Evaluation of Teachers

It is important to think about evaluation methods of teachers that might or might not reflect quality teaching skills when it comes to holding teachers at such a high level for student achievement. The two main purposes of teacher evaluation, assuring teacher quality and facilitating improvement in teachers' work, will best be achieved when teachers and their organizations claim the responsibility for developing and implementing methods for assessing teacher performance that respect the complexity and depth of their professional knowledge and practice (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004). In other words, do current teacher evaluation procedures assess all the components that teachers are supposed to possess?

The majority of educators agree with the fact that holding teachers accountable is imperative for student learning to take place. However, a lively debate surrounds the question of how accountability is established and about the place and value of professionalism in accountability (Bullough, Clark, & Patterson, 2003). According to Gallagher (2002) schools such as Vaughn Elementary in Los Angeles, California evaluate teachers in ten domain areas, and teachers are not only evaluated by their principal, but by peers and themselves, too. Teachers are rated on a scale of one to four on each standard. This school found that the alignment between taught and tested curriculum, both in terms of content and cognitive demand, is a highly significant predictor of student performance. This study did make it clear, however, that no single measure should be seen as the sole criterion for judging performance. In this school's case, other factors such as the large population of English language learners would be taken into account. This study shows the possibility of improving teacher evaluation systems by clearly defining high quality teaching in specific subject areas and evaluating teachers based on that definition.

Nationally Certified Teachers

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) are all organizations that recognize teachers of outstanding quality. Vandevoort et al. (2004) found that students of NBCT's learn more than students whose teachers do not hold this prestigious credential. Increasing the number of teachers who earn National Board Certification will have a direct impact on raising student achievement levels in schools across the country. Some policymakers feel that by having more nationally certified teachers employed in a school district, student achievement is more cost effective because teachers make a personal decision to work towards becoming certified. This, in turn, saves the district money because most teachers pay out of their own pocket to apply for certification and take the required exams in order to earn these prominent awards.

While students of NBPTS certified teachers' outperformed students whose teachers were not NBPTS certified on curriculum embedded assessments, there was no significant difference on external measures (Gallagher, 2002). It is believed that by

having more highly qualified teachers in the classroom, student achievement will increase. The education field is still in need of an effective tool for measuring a teacher's effectiveness and its connection to student learning.

Suggestions for Teachers to Sustain Quality Classroom Instruction

Regardless of the types of evaluation tools a school district implements for teachers, it is the responsibility of teachers themselves to be informed of educational practices and research that affects the instruction delivered to students. As Gallagher (2002) concurs, most people would argue that teaching requires a variety of proficiencies that can justifiably contribute to teacher evaluation, yet which may only indirectly influence student performance on a given assessment. Teachers need to become familiar with current research on student achievement and network with colleagues to learn more about teaching expertise. It is imperative that teachers and other educators be familiar with NCLB and its policy and practice implications. Yet, by narrowly defining the use of federal dollars for research, the NCLB has significantly restricted the manner by which educators can be informed of effective practices (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004).

Teachers are responsible for finding ways to educate all children and it is a teacher's duty to participate in professional development activities that foster this responsibility. Practices such as differentiated instruction, data driven instruction and identifying areas of weakness in students are crucial to developing the quality of classroom teachers. Differentiated instruction is vital for increased student performance because it meets the needs of every student. This connects to the notion of schools making improvements based on test data, especially in weak areas. Teachers need to remember that external characteristics, such as student socioeconomic status and parental educational attainment, impact student achievement in significant ways, but when those differences are controlled for, teachers are the most important determinants of student achievement (Gallagher, 2002). These findings support the views of Bullough et al. (2003) that if, as some teacher education detractors argue, academic ability and scores on standardized achievement tests are good measures of teacher quality, these students ought to be outstanding.

Student Achievement

External Factors

There are many factors other than instruction that can influence how students perform on standardized tests. Should these factors be taken in account with test results? Can these factors be controlled? Because of increased accountability demands placed on schools and teachers, researchers question how influential these outside factors are, especially those that cannot be controlled by classroom teachers. Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth, and Harold (2003) found that educators were adamant that they could only be held accountable for student achievement to a limited extent because of the impact of family background. In their study, teachers, principals and governors were asked how accountable they felt school staff could actually be for student outcomes. The majority of the participants in the study felt that "outcomes-based assessment of schools would

always be unfair because of the way it assumes the efforts and effectiveness of staff can be read off student achievement” (Thrupp et al., 475).

Another factor that influences student achievement is the motivation and responsibility of the individual student. Socioeconomic status and parental level of education as well as the home/family background were found to be uncontrollable factors in the classroom where high stakes tests were administered. Other schools have relatively high test scores and their student population consists of primarily low-income students with little parent involvement, which argues against the excuse of not being able to control certain factors. Student performance on high stakes tests can cause increased levels of anxiety, stress, and fatigue. All three have detrimental effects on student performance (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). In some school districts, students with high test results are rewarded externally. For students who do not perform well, such as those with test anxiety, language barriers, or special education students who are required to take a grade equivalent test, this extrinsic reward system can be devastating. “If the students do not believe that an opportunity for success exists, the external motivating forces of the rewards or sanctions will have a minimal effect” (Kellaghan et al., as cited in Abrams et al., 2003). Many times this type of reward system can increase dropout rates due to low motivation of students who cannot achieve a high enough score.

Standardized Tests

Standardized tests are norm-referenced tests that compare individual scores to others at the same grade level, also known as the norm, and usually only a small sample of content is tested. There is controversy over whether these tests reflect classroom instruction and student learning. As Popham (2005) concludes, these tests are one-size-fits-all. Test items are not always aligned with instruction, and there seems to be a mismatch between what is taught and what is tested. Standardized tests include math content, verbal or spatial content, and content requiring prior knowledge of a subject all of which are questionable as to whether students really learn these skills in school or already display this knowledge.

With the understanding that only such wide-scale testing can lead to validated educational practices, there is even more reason to verify what is included in standardized tests and to instill proper thinking skills that students must be taught in order to perform well on these tests (Simpson et al., 2004). How valid are standardized tests? When trends in student performance levels on similar standardized tests are not consistent, the accuracy of a particular test as an indicator of student achievement is questionable (Abrams et al., 2003).

Standardized tests provide comparison among and across different groups in order to make decisions to help students. Many teachers use the data from test results to drive their instruction, but most teachers agree that the results from a standardized test are only one part of their overall assessment of students. It is likely that the NCLB Act of 2001 will have a significant impact on state testing systems throughout the country, possibly pushing many states toward the norm-referenced tests that are quick and easy to administer and score (Hoff, as cited in Bullough et al., 2003).

It also depends on the style and format of the high stakes test. In states, such as Kentucky, the state test at one time was based on portfolios. Several studies in Kentucky

found that writing portfolios had a positive impact on writing instruction. Also, there was an increase in instructional emphasis on problem solving and writing in math as a result of the portfolio-style test (Abrams et al., 2003).

Impact of Testing on Instruction

Research shows that in many cases, classroom instruction is changing to better match the content found on high-stakes tests. Also, instruction focuses on test content or test-taking skills and ignores subject areas that are not on the test. High-stakes tests limit the scope of the classroom instruction and student learning in undesirable ways (Stecher & Barron, as cited in Abrams et al., 2003). In a study by Cankoy and Tut (2005), one group of fourth grade students spent 70% of class time on test-taking skills, a second group spent 50% of class time on test-taking skills, and a third group only spent 30% of class time on test-taking skills. Test-taking skills included completing test questions from former tests, giving tests for drill, teaching procedures for answering multiple-choice questions, and memorizing rules. The study found that teaching students standard procedures to solve different types of math problems is not an effective approach to teach problem solving. Also, there was no difference in the three groups' performances on non-routine math story problems, and spending more class time on test-taking skills did not effect the non-routine story problem solving. To conclude, this study feels that tests and classroom instruction should emphasize and foster problem-solving skills more so than test-taking skills.

Standardized tests have changed the pace and content of instruction, where relentless drill practice for students is instilled. The concentration in tested content areas can be positive if it leads to greater emphasis on the knowledge and skills stressed in challenging content standards that the test is intended to measure (Linn, 2003). Placing more focus on test content can also make teachers feel that their expertise in the education field is not being used to its full potential. Some teachers feel that being forced to teach to the test contradicts their ideas of a valid education for students. "The implementation of the test may, in effect, lead to a de-professionalization of teachers" (Abrams et al., 2003, p. 20). Pressure on students to perform well on tests can also increase anxiety and stress while taking the tests. Regardless of the rewards and/or sanctions associated with test results, the implementation of state testing programs has changed teaching in ways that many teachers feel negatively impacts the quality of instruction students receive (Abrams et al.). The positive aspects of NCLB include the fact that it stays the course on standards-based reform and encourages states to adopt ambitious subject-matter standards. It pays particular attention to promoting the learning groups of students who have lagged behind in the past (Linn).

The Distance between Different Levels of Control

There is little connection between those who make decisions based on student achievement and teacher accountability and the actual classroom teachers and students that these decisions directly affect. Also, there are many differences between local, state, and national standards for education. In the case of high-stakes assessments, new assessment methods need to be found that will allow a wider range of groups-teachers,

administrators, employers, academics, researchers, and others-to make useful contributions based on their own particular knowledge and skills (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004).

Some researchers believe that there is too much specialization between curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and this separation begins at the college level. Even though assessment professionals seem to have the most clout currently, we still see many instances in which the activities carried out by curriculum and instruction professionals can have a major impact-either positive or negative-on the work of assessment professionals (Popham, 2004). There also seems to be a push towards focusing on the school as a whole rather than a particular classroom experience.

The way in which accountability measures occur impacts teachers and students. Educational accountability for teachers, schools, and students appears directed toward identifying those not achieving under highly prescriptive standards as failures and prompts an even more strong-handed, top-down decision-making process that tends to further exacerbate the problem (Bullough et al., 2003). The majority of research discusses the fact that accountability must be shared among different groups in order to be effective and reflect student learning. This shared responsibility should include students, parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and researchers. "Incentives need to be distributed across all parties to encourage the shared responsibility that is needed for real improvement. Most accountability systems now in place focus so heavily on educators and/or students that others are largely ignored. Greater emphasis needs to be given to other responsible parties" (Linn, 2003, p. 2). Linn's study concludes that accountability systems need to broaden their definitions of what counts as evidence of success and to do this they need to reflect upon past experience. Linn recognizes that NCLB does not accept steady progress as improvement. To improve, schools must meet AYP targets in a short amount of time, which can be unrealistic in some cases.

A positive approach to the accountability measures is seen in a Sacramento, California school district. School superintendent Jim Sweeney (2000) has created a performance-driven system designed to achieve a goal that every nine of ten students will meet standards within a year. Everyone, including the community, is held responsible for student achievement. A combination of planning, staff development, continuous monitoring, feedback, assistance, and intervention are the keys to being successful in raising student achievement with this system.

There are many connections between these three themes that are not being made and this impacts accountability. Controversy exists between what makes a valid evaluation method for teachers and what is considered a reliable measure of student achievement. In many instances, teachers are held accountable for student achievement based on one standardized test score. There is another disconnect between instruction that is delivered in the classroom and content that appears on high stakes tests. Many times instruction is geared towards test content and other subject areas are ignored.

Whether test scores are valid measures of student learning is another argument. Other variables, such as motivation, family background, and socioeconomic status, have to be taken in account for student achievement. Classroom teachers alone cannot control many of these factors. School administration seems disconnected from the daily classroom experience. This is relevant in teacher evaluation procedures and decisions that are made for schools. There is little positive communication between students, teachers,

administrators, and policymakers when it comes to accountability. Measurable standards of performance are set to compare schools and states, but the comparisons are quite uneven because of uncommon expectations for schools and states.

Most research agrees that accountability is a shared responsibility between students, teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers, and researchers (Linn, 2003). Also, the majority of educators feel that they should be held accountable for highly qualified teaching. What highly qualified teaching consists of varies among researchers, but one characteristic that is consistent is that teachers should not be solely responsible for student achievement.

In order to use standardized tests as measures of student achievement, these tests must reflect classroom instruction, which must come from a standards-based curriculum and approach to teaching. In addition, several different kinds of assessment for students must be administered to reflect achievement and progress in learning. Just as students should be evaluated based on ongoing assessments, educators must also be able to display a variety of skills and expertise over a period of time in order to be held accountable for student achievement.

What teachers really need are assessment instruments that measure worthwhile skills or significant bodies of knowledge. Then teachers have to show the world that they can instruct children so those children make striking pre instructional to post instructional progress. If educators accept the position that standardized achievement test scores should not be used to measure the quality of schooling, then they must provide other, credible evidence that can be used to ascertain the quality of schooling. (Popham, 2005, p. 315)

The following questions will be the focus of this study. What are some valid ways to hold educators accountable for delivering a high level of instruction? What are other possible options besides standardized achievement tests that can be used as reliable indicators of student learning/achievement? How does classroom instruction relate to the content found on standardized tests? What are positive and negative effects of testing and what impact does this have on students, parents, and teachers? What implications does this research have for educators? In conclusion, this study seeks to add depth to current research on effective classroom instruction and its connection to student achievement. Also, this study will attempt to fill the gap that exists in the literature with connecting student and teacher performance in relation to accountability standards.

The first author of this paper is a fourth-grade classroom teacher and the second author is a teacher educator. We know that teachers have difficulties in meeting the demand of high student performance on standardized tests. Many teachers find themselves teaching to the test, which can cause them to question their creativity as teachers. The fact that a lot of resources and professional development are used towards teaching teachers about the test and how to prepare students for the test was the main motivator for this study. We wanted to learn about the different viewpoints of testing. Do parents, students, and other teachers view it the same way as we do?

Method

Before beginning our research investigation, we gained our approval from our university's Institutional Review Board. The review process ensured that our participants were treated ethically and that their rights were not violated.

This study used an open-ended questionnaire as its primary source of data. This method was chosen to provide us insight into participant's thinking on the topics that were asked. We believed the topic of testing to be sensitive, especially for teachers, so we felt that an open-ended survey would yield more truthful responses than face-to-face interviews.

Participants

We surveyed 17 fourth grade students in this research study. Fourteen parents of fourth grade students also participated. The students attended a public elementary school in the Midwestern United States. Nine students were girls and eight students were boys. The school includes kindergarten through fifth grades. The student and parent participants were recruited from the first author's fourth-grade classroom. Letters and consent forms were sent home to all parents asking for their participation for both themselves and their children. Those that were interested in participating were asked to return the signed consent forms. Students of the parents who consented to their children's participation were then asked to complete a consent form as well. It was made clear in both letters that participation was completely voluntary.

The study also included 15 teachers with varied experiences at the elementary level. Seven teachers were from the same school as the students in this study, while eight teachers taught in a different public school district in the same state. Three kindergarten, two first grade, one second grade, two third grade, one fourth grade, one fifth grade, one special education, one reading specialist, and one fine arts teacher participated in the study. Two teachers did not state their grade level. Three teachers had from one to four years of teaching experience, five teachers had between five and fifteen years of experience, while seven teachers surveyed had over fifteen years of experience. All the teachers who participated had administered a standardized test previously. In order to obtain a broader sense of ideas from teachers, we targeted participants from two school districts. We placed letters describing the study and consent forms in teachers' school mailboxes. Teachers who gave consent returned their signed consent forms back to the first author.

Data Collection and Analysis

We designed three surveys for this study. Each survey includes both open-ended and close-ended questions designed to address four main areas:

1. Effect and impact of standardized testing
2. Relationship between classroom instruction and standardized tests
3. Accountability
4. Factors that influence testing

Students who gave consent to participate completed the survey at school. The researcher read the questions orally to the students and gave them time to complete their answers. Surveys were collected once all participants completed the survey. The student survey contains eight questions, two of which are short response questions. This survey includes questions on students' thoughts on standardized testing and the purposes for it.

The two open-ended questions are:

1. Do you enjoy taking [standardized tests]? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think you have to take these tests?

We sent teacher and parent surveys to those participants who returned consent forms. The parent survey contains eight questions, four of which ask for explanations.

1. Please share what you know about state mandated, or standardized tests that your child takes each fall and spring in fourth grade (these tests include Scholastic Test Service or STS and Illinois State Achievement Test or ISAT).
2. Do you have any personal feelings regarding these specific tests? If so, please explain.
3. How do you feel about holding your child's classroom teacher solely accountable for your child's performance on standardized achievement tests?
4. Have standardized tests or test results impacted your family in any way? If so, please explain.

This survey was intended to gain insight into parents' thoughts on the standardized tests their children take each year. This survey also included content that was relevant for the community's perspective on education and testing.

The teacher survey contained sixteen questions about views or ideas on standardized testing and quality classroom instruction. Seven of these questions were open-ended.

1. Please share your experience with and feelings towards standardized testing.
2. If you believe teachers do teach to the test, for what reasons does this occur?
3. Of these choices, including other, who do you believe is most responsible for a student's performance? Why?
4. Which do you feel are the most reliable means of teacher evaluation? (e.g., principal watches a lesson 3 times a year, weekly classroom visits, portfolios of work, professional development including evidence of implementation, etc.)
5. Please list any contributing factors that might influence students' test performance.
6. What are the other ways, besides standardized testing, that you determine your students' ability/potential?

Responses from each of the surveys' open-ended questions were then analyzed under each of the four main themes to determine the similarities and differences among

the three groups. In order to ensure that the interpretation of this data was accurate, both researchers reviewed and analyzed participants' responses, and then compared and discussed findings.

Results

This section includes all the results from the surveys and interviews and then discusses the common themes among the results. This study sought to find positive and negative effects and intended purposes of standardized testing, the connection between classroom instruction and standardized test content, as well as who is or should be held accountable for test performance, and any factors that influence it. Also, finding valid ways to evaluate educators and seeking a connection between local, state, and national levels of influence on student achievement were researched. Each research question is summarized and then results from students, parents, and teachers, are shared in relation to the research question and its findings. After the results are shared for that particular question, a discussion follows including any similarities or possible explanations. The themes were generated from the responses in the study, first from within each research question and then throughout different questions. The different groups of participants' ideas were compared and contrasted and common themes were discussed among the groups involved. The end includes a discussion of common trends voiced throughout this section and in what ways these commonalities are implications for the education field.

Effect and Impact of Standardized Testing

Students

An attempt was made to find both positive and negative effects of standardized tests on students, parents, and teachers as well as the impact standardized testing might have on those directly involved with the testing. This research problem was connected to the overall perceived purposes of high stakes testing. All students surveyed have taken a standardized test before, including the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and Scholastic Testing Service (STS). Students throughout the state of Illinois take the ISAT in third through eighth grade and students in the school where this study was conducted take the STS Tests in first through fifth grade.

Three of the students surveyed said they enjoy taking these kinds of tests, while nine students enjoy the tests a little, and five students do not like taking standardized tests. The students had positive feelings toward standardized testing such as the idea of these tests help them learn, the tests show their strengths and weaknesses, the content on the test is challenging and fun, and the results show the state of Illinois what his/her ability is. Those who disliked standardized tests thought the tests were too long with too many questions. Also, the students mentioned the tests being difficult, making them tired, making them nervous of test outcomes, and the setup of the test itself. One student said she felt rushed and was not allowed to go back to other sections to finish. Another student did not enjoy sitting and waiting for everyone to finish or for time to expire when he finished the test.

The majority of students felt their test results were very important. Most of the students surveyed revealed that they talk a little bit with their parents about the ISAT and STS. Four students claimed they talked a lot with their parents, while two students did not talk with their parents at all about these tests. Most students agreed that someone, possibly their teacher, had explained the reasons for taking standardized tests, while some students were not sure if this had taken place. The students supplied a plethora of reasons why they thought they had to take ISAT and STS. Most students' reasons were to tell their teacher what they have or have not learned, while many students' reasons were to tell the government or state what they know or do not know. Other reasons for testing included reflecting on their learning, making them smarter, deciding their grades on their report cards, being promoted to the next grade, and being mandated by the school district.

It is interesting how students view the standardized tests. They have heard from their teachers that the tests are given to show strengths and weaknesses and to help teachers obtain information about their students. When the students talked about their results being shown to the government this idea probably stems from the name given to the test, with the word Illinois in it. This idea also might have come from the media attention given to the standardized tests each year or from parents talking about it around their children. There remains some confusion on the true purpose of the standardized test and this may be a factor in the student's performance.

Parents

Fourteen parents of the fourth grade students in this study completed a survey about their thoughts and understanding of standardized testing. The parents were asked to share their knowledge of state mandated tests that their child takes each year in school. They responded by stating that the ISAT and STS allow comparison between different schools and between students at the same grade level. The majority of parents understood the fact that state tests show their child's standing in relation to the state standards and benchmarks as far as grade level expectations. Also, the parents pointed out that standardized tests allow the state to know how schools are doing and if there are certain needs from students or schools within the state that need to be addressed. Two parents surveyed stated they had little or no knowledge of the purposes of state mandated tests. Parents in the survey mentioned no negative testing aspects.

It was interesting to learn the amount of knowledge parents have about the ISAT and STS. This impacts their children's understanding and provides an example or model for children to see their parents interested and knowledgeable about education. This confirms the notion that standardized testing can have positive effects. It also sends a message to educators that some parents do care about their child's performance and therefore it becomes a joint effort of accountability. The concentration of effort on testing is desirable if it leads to greater emphasis on the knowledge and skills stressed in challenging content standards that the test is intended to measure (Shephard as cited in Linn, 2003).

Teachers

Positive feelings from teachers toward standardized testing were that test results provide data, trends, patterns, and comparison between students, classes, and schools. Teachers, overall, felt that the tests were helpful if properly used. Teachers feel that test results can be helpful to drive instruction and know where students are at academically, but sometimes too much emphasis is put on the results and this leads to pressure and sometimes unrealistic expectations. Standardized tests are an indicator of acquired state skills/standards and these specific tests show how schools and students are performing at each grade level.

Although teachers had many positive feelings toward testing, they also expressed some negative aspects of standardized testing. Some educators felt the test was biased especially with the way questions were worded. Also, these tests cause pressure and have unrealistic expectations for some students. Frustration is experienced for students who do not perform at grade level during high stakes tests. The tests are administered in such a small time frame given the amount of emphasis put on them throughout the school year. Many teachers thought that standardized tests do not reflect student's ability and that the testing environment is sometimes unnatural to the students. Also, if the tests are given at the student's grade level, those who have a lower instructional level do not show accurate understanding of key concepts. The concentration on tests can be negative when it focuses too closely on the specific formats and parts of the content domain that are emphasized to a greater degree on the test without attention to broader subject-matter standards (Shephard, as cited in Linn, 2003).

Educators are the ones who know their students best, and for students who do not perform well on tests or for students not at their grade level in the content areas, this causes teachers to feel helpless with his/her students while taking this mandatory test. Also, no matter how much schools or students study for standardized tests, there is no guarantee that performance will reflect this preparation. It is different to write or create one's own assessment for students over material covered in class, compared to teachers having no control over the amount and type of questions that will appear on a standardized test.

Relationship between Classroom Instruction and Standardized Tests

Students

In this research study, other possible options to indicate student learning besides standardized tests were explored. This part of the study looked for a relationship between classroom instruction and content on high stakes tests. Half of the students surveyed thought that most of the test questions were similar to things they have learned at school, while other students felt only some of the test content and classroom instruction was similar. One student believed that the standardized tests and school were very different from one another. It would be convenient if test content were similar to the state's curriculum, which it should be if students are being taught material aligned with state standards and the test items are taken from the state curriculum.

Parents

Parents expressed their feelings toward these specific tests stating that standardized tests are valuable indicators that tell how a child and how a school is doing, which in turn helps teachers and schools see where their school and students are at compared to others. Parents pointed out that the tests are valuable if they are used to increase children's knowledge or to improve areas of weakness. They also brought up the fact that with test results, they, as parents, can compare their child to others in the state, district, and school, and this can be used as a means of charting their child's progress. Other comments from parents included the opinion that bad test takers score lower, different factors can affect a student's test taking experience, standardized tests are not a true measure of what children know, and that this is just another part of the school experience. One parent declared that standardized tests can be studied for and that some schools simply study better than others. Again, parents see standardized tests as meaningful as long as they add to or extend their child's knowledge and are not viewed as a totally different aspect of the school curriculum.

A majority of parents did think sometimes there was too much emphasis put on standardized test results, while some did not think this was the case. One parent believed there was absolutely too much emphasis put on test results, and one parent was unsure of the level of emphasis. Eight parents stated that standardized tests and test results had not impacted their family in any way. One parent mentioned that even though a child's test scores were low, his/her child's report card grades were high. The parent explained this imbalance by blaming nerves during testing or ability. Some parents focus more on grades and report cards rather than basing their child's learning on standardized tests. Other parents did like the fact that tests informed them of weak areas of their child and gave them ideas of what to focus on at home in order to help their child. Also, a parent revealed that a consistent routine and health at home happened every day, and not just on testing days. Parents realize that the test results are only a piece of their child's learning experience, and some might find ongoing assessments, such as report cards more valuable.

Teachers

Over half of the teachers surveyed thought that daily classroom instruction and content on standardized tests are somewhat similar, and a small number of teachers thought classroom instruction and test content were very similar. In general, almost all of the teachers feel there is some teaching related to the test in the classroom instruction. Teaching related to the test includes helping students know the content on the tests, how to properly answer certain types of questions, and practice test taking skills during the school year. Teachers believed the main reasons for teaching about the test were to get good scores on the state-mandated tests and the fact that the test scores are published as public information creates competition within and among schools, school districts, and states within the nation. Some researchers do not think that teaching about the test is effective. For example, Linn (2003) believes that by attaching high stakes to test results in an accountability system leads to a narrowing of the instructional focus of teachers and

principals. Teachers place greater emphasis on material that is covered on a high stakes test than they do on other material that is still considered important.

Also, teachers feel that there is too much at stake for them to ignore the fact that some teaching regarding the test is necessary in order for their students to perform well. Teachers mentioned that school district requirements are being raised and expectations are high for teachers and students. Other educators brought up the fact that the content on the test should be taught anyway in order to help create successful students. Also, by teachers promoting test-taking skills, they are exposing their students to and providing experience with the format of standardized tests. Teaching about the test is not considered a bad idea as long as there is not too much emphasis put on the test performance and the students continue to learn the state standards and benchmarks expected at their grade level. In a study done by Cankoy and Tut (2005), they believe teaching to the test not only produces unproductive and uncritical students but also can be misleading.

Eight of the 15 teachers surveyed thought that students' test results, whether it was current or future students, were somewhat important for classroom instruction. The test results give teachers an indication of what and how much of the standards-aligned curriculum they are responsible for teaching, their teaching methods and whether or not there is a variety, and how well they know and address their students' needs. One third of the teachers believed test results were very important to guide classroom instruction. The teachers were in agreement that there are other ways, besides standardized testing alone, that determine a student's ability or potential. Assessments that are given quarterly and are documented with a student's progress gives teachers useful data on students' strengths and weaknesses. Classroom observations are a key indicator of a student's potential. Responses to verbal questions, daily work, participation rates, teacher-given tests, and the personal contact between a teacher and his/her students also indicate student performance. Portfolios of students, formal classroom assessments, anecdotal notes, and utilizing the state curriculum with standards are other means of revealing student achievement. Continuous assessment relates to the larger picture of student development (George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003).

For special education students, Individualized Educational Plans (IEP's) are a valid measure of student progress. The majority of the educators surveyed declared that standardized tests are somewhat of a valid measure of student learning. Many teachers feel that these tests play a part in the learning process, but many times, they become too important. Two teachers thought that standardized tests are not a valid measurement of student learning for every student that is required to take them. One teacher mentioned that student learning is valid from these tests if compared fairly.

Accountability

Students

Finding valid ways to hold educators accountable for delivering a high level of instruction seems to be a constant menace in the education field. Effective teacher evaluation processes, responsibility of student performance on tests, and contributing factors that impact test performance continue to be questioned. When asked who they thought was most responsible for doing well on ISAT and STS, the students revealed

themselves as the most responsible. Their teacher, principal, and their parents were among others the students held responsible for their test performance.

Parents

Most of the parents surveyed feel their child's test results are somewhat important, while only a few think test results are very important. One parent felt the results were not important. This parent might feel that there is no need to emphasize one test and that daily work and quarterly grades are more significant. Half of the parents in this study agree their child is somewhat prepared to take standardized tests. Six of the fourteen parents feel their child is very much prepared to take state mandated tests.

Most parents believe that a child's parents and his/her classroom teacher are equally responsible for preparing a child to take standardized tests. The school principal, the child's peers, and the student himself were other people that parents felt should take responsibility. A small number of parents mentioned that the classroom teacher should be primarily responsible for this preparation. None of the parents surveyed, however, declared the classroom teacher solely accountable for a child's performance on standardized achievement tests.

Teachers

In this study, teachers felt that classroom teachers and students were equally responsible for students' performance on standardized tests. Parents, principals, teacher aids, district administrators, and the community such as after school programs, were also included as responsible participants in a student's performance. Between students, teachers, parents, principals, aids, administrators, and community members the teachers surveyed declared students themselves as the most responsible for their performance on high stakes tests. Teachers pointed out that a student's effort, drive, daily attitude, and personal decisions they made were their own responsibility. Also, it is the student's responsibility to apply what they learn and to make a choice to perform well. Teachers think that they are responsible for taking time to teach students the content they need to know, to show improvement in students over time, and to prepare them thoroughly before taking a test. Educators believe the parents' responsibility includes giving students the fundamentals or background skills needed to be successful, and to make education a priority in order for their children to understand the importance of the tests. Regardless of who is or is not responsible for student performance, all the teachers surveyed agreed that it is not fair to hold teachers solely accountable for student performance on standardized tests. Are teachers ever held solely accountable for their students' performance? It is easy for parents and administrators to blame the teacher first, and this seems to occur more in negative situations, when test scores have dropped, but it also happens when students raise their scores and a teacher is praised for his/her efforts with a group of students. People tend to forget all the parties responsible for a student's performance on a standardized test. Research reports the findings that teachers rejected the notion that test scores should be used to hold schools and teachers accountable. It is inappropriate to evaluate teachers/administrators on the basis of student test results (Abrams et al., 2003).

Overall, students and teachers appear to be most responsible for outcomes on high stakes tests. Some research has different views. For example, in a study by Thrupp et al., (2003), most of those interviewed were adamant that teachers and administrators could only be held accountable for student achievement to a limited extent because of the impact of family background. The family background will always be the most powerful influence on what happens to a child. Contrary to that theory, teachers in this study believe students play a major role in their performance, probably with school in general, where as parents felt that it is the teacher's ultimate responsibility to navigate a way to meet the student where he/she is at and motivate him/her to be successful in their learning. It continues to be a shared responsibility between the student, the teacher, and the parents to do what it takes to help each child learn effectively and have a positive attitude towards testing. Even the students recognize their responsibility and their role in being successful students, even at the young age of nine or ten years old. Teachers might be used to putting the responsibility all on the students simply because teachers have not always been provided with appropriate materials and training to meet the needs of students and expectations that standardized testing places on them.

Factors that Influence Testing

Parents

According to parents surveyed, some factors that affect test performance include the amount of parental support a child receives, the home environment, a child's health status on the day of the test, and the motivation of the student to perform well. Parents pointed out that a teacher should be held accountable for presenting the curriculum and the standards to the students, encouraging students to be successful, and demonstrating a student's progress throughout the school year. Also, parents brought up the fact that the classroom is not the only environment for a child, that there are other influences on a student besides his/her teacher.

Teachers

Teachers included in this study talked about a variety of contributing factors that might influence students' test performance. The most popular factors were the child's home environment, the child's health, and the child's attitude toward the tests. The child's health included the amount of sleep prior to the test and what the child's diet consisted of, along with how the student was feeling during the test. The child's attitude encompassed the child's stress level, possible test anxiety, and his/her self-esteem level. The testing environment was another significant factor in test performance. The classroom atmosphere, the weather, and the amount of peer pressure before and during the test are additional factors attributed with standardized testing. Parental involvement, amount of background knowledge on the subject matter, testing time constraints, attention span of the test taker, relationship between the teacher and students, past educational experiences including tests, and the student's behavior along with his/hers modified educational level of understanding all play a role in how a student performs on a test. Increased levels of anxiety, stress, and fatigue are often seen among students

participating in high stakes testing programs. All three can have detrimental effects on student performance (Abrams et al., 2003).

Obviously the perfect testing situation is unlikely to occur and many factors can affect performance on high stakes tests. Usually these factors are negative, or might contribute to a student functioning poorly on a test. Maybe positive factors should have been researched in this study, such as motivation techniques teachers or schools use to get students excited for tests or maybe small rewards for students based on their rigorous testing schedule. Also, there should not be considerable attention given to these external factors because they are just used as excuses for poor performance. In addition, many of these factors cannot be controlled by schools, but are the parents' responsibility, and according to most of the participants in this study, it is the teacher's responsibility to look past the uncontrolled factors and focus on the student as a whole and help that student reach his/her goals. The teacher has to find a way to help each child learn to his/her potential and to provide a variety of learning opportunities.

Teacher Evaluation

Teachers

In the area of teacher evaluation, teachers surveyed stated that teachers should be evaluated on a routine basis to assess their teaching methods. Most felt a combination of scheduled formal classroom visits a few times a year from the building principal, weekly informal classroom visits from the principal, portfolios of teacher's work, and professional development including evidence of implementation of effective teaching methods would be necessary to properly evaluate teachers. Unscheduled weekly visits to a teacher's classroom by the principal were the most popular idea supplied by surveyed teachers. Also, professional development, continual communication, and discussion between the principal and teacher, along with samples from students' work portfolios, were considered other effective evaluation methods. Teachers showing evidence of using best teaching practices was another idea for reliable teacher evaluation.

Discussion

It seems as if the desire for ongoing assessment of teachers is similar to wanting ongoing student assessment. The teachers in this study realize the importance of getting to know the child as a whole. This is confirmed by teachers saying that less than five formal evaluations each year is not enough to properly evaluate educators. We think it is encouraging to see teachers wanting to be evaluated using a variety of methods. If only student evaluation could be this promising. Teachers and parents see the whole child and the ongoing progress students make, but as far as state and federal regulations, there is only one side, the testing side, they see with a particular child, school, or district. This two week testing regimen is such a small part of a child's school year, which is similar to two formal teacher evaluations being such a miniscule portion of all the things a teacher does throughout a school year or in his/her teaching career.

Positive ideas gained from standardized tests include being able to compare students at the same grade level and schools within the state and the nation. Students, parents, and teachers agreed that test results provide school districts with information that shows strengths and weaknesses with children and also needs that should be addressed. Data from test results helps guide instruction and give schools goals to work towards in the coming school year. Among students, parents, and teachers a common negative aspect of standardized tests is the test format. This includes the length of the test, the kinds of test questions there are, and some of the procedures that are required for the tests. For example, a child that is well below grade level standards is expected to meet or exceed standards at grade level.

Educators, parents, and students agreed that the test content was similar to content in the classroom, but when there is too much emphasis put on the test content it can be detrimental to learning. Parents felt that the content on the test should extend their child's learning, and that it should only be one piece of their child's progress. Teachers believe that test results should only be a part of the whole child's educational experience and other methods of assessment should be taken in account. Getting the whole picture goes along with the feelings of the teachers that teachers should be evaluated based on a combination of things. A few formal classroom evaluations do not provide enough information for principals to accurately assess teachers. Teachers also feel that there are lots of different ways to support their teaching attributes showing they are qualified teachers and should be evaluated highly.

In this study, teachers and parents all realized that different factors, some of which are difficult to control, could contribute to a child's test performance. The majority of those surveyed and interviewed believed that one major factor is a student's attitude towards the tests, school, or study habits in general. Also, teachers and parents took in account a child's home life or parental involvement along with a child's health on the test day as being factors that influence testing results. Ultimately, though students, parents, and teachers feel that teachers and students themselves are most responsible for testing performance. Students in this study hold themselves responsible, while parents think teachers have the primary responsibility of how students perform on standardized tests. In a study by Thrupp et al. (2003), a teacher states that educators can be accountable for competently giving them every opportunity to achieve, to create an appropriate climate in the classroom to encourage success, but for students' achievement, they were not accountable. Overall, taking responsibility for performance outweighs the excuses or factors that come into play. A teacher's demeanor and instructional strategies have a lot of influence on how a student views the state mandated tests.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in this study. The participants could have been more diverse. Administrators, such as principles, could have been included and students from different grade levels could have been surveyed. The survey questions on the teacher and parent surveys could have been more detailed. On the teacher survey, more questions should have been asked about national and state connections between the levels of control and influence on student achievement to increase learning. On the parent survey the question about responsibility for test performance did not include the student as one

of the choices. We are confident that more parents would have marked the student as responsible, possibly changing the results. Overall, the survey questions and options need to be revised to get more to the point of the impact of standardized testing.

Implications for the Education Field

This research study encompasses many implications for educators. Readers can gain an understanding of what students and parents know and think about standardized testing, which might inspire teachers and administrators to take a different approach or look at testing. Also, the common themes discussed in this study reflect the similar feelings and goals that parents and teachers have when it comes to helping students progress, improve, and show their potential. This study opens one's eyes to the many factors that sometimes manipulate test results and the effect this has on the public which in turn pressures teachers and school districts even more. Sometimes this attention to testing is positive in that schools use the information to guide instruction and work to meet students' needs, but negative aspects, such as unrealistic expectations and unwanted pressure can cause frustration among some students and teachers. This study presents two sides to testing and it makes a point that standardized tests are not all bad. Also, the common theme of looking at the whole scheme of things sums up the findings. Whether it is educators or students, more than one assessment or observation needs to be considered in order to appropriately evaluate a teacher or student. A student's standardized test or a minor classroom evaluation of a teacher does not give an in-depth answer to the question of whether a student is learning or if a teacher is providing quality classroom instruction to his/her students.

This study fills the gap within research studies that simply focus on one of the following; accountability, standardized tests, or student performance and achievement. In this study, these ideas are connected and molded together to further look at the impact each has on the other. Also, by including parents and students in the study, there is a variety of viewpoints about each topic and the fact that some opinions are similar gives members of society, especially educators, hope for a positive outcome to begin to emerge from the current, popular, negative pressure associated with high stakes testing procedures in the education field.

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